

BRIEF TO THE SESSION CHAIR THE FUTURE OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM DIALOGUE

Submitted by Martin Segger

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Martin Segger is a cultural historian, retired academic and museum director. At the University of Victoria he founded the Cultural Resource Management Program, was a professor in the Art History and Visual Studies Department, Director of the University's art museum and gallery, and is currently a research associate, Centre for Global Studies. He has served on the boards of the Canadian Museums Association, ICOM Canada, ICOM- UNESCO International, ICOMOS Canada, and was president of the Commonwealth Museums Association, as well as service on the boards of the National Trust for Canada and the B.C. Heritage Trust. His professional museum career started in 1974 with the Museums Advisory services division of the BC Provincial Museum. He served on the RBCM Special Operating Agency board previous to its emergence as a Crown Corporation in 2003. Local community service included two terms on Victoria City Council and also the B.C. Capital Commission and the founding board of the Victoria Harbour Authority.

Martin Segger currently coordinates a network of about 250 local interested persons exploring the feasibility of listing Victoria as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This brief constitutes his own observations and opinions which should be seen as independent of any other person, group or agency.

Preliminary:

I have been able to review two RBCM documents *The Royal British Columbia Museum Report to British Columbians (June 29, 2021)* and *Royal BC Museum Modernization: What We Heard. (October 2019)*. Commendations are due to both the Museum and their authors for the clarity and frankness of these documents.

Regarding the first, which mainly addresses internal organizational issues, I would only point out that this is of minor interest to the general public who are far more concerned with services owed and delivered. Regarding the second, while obviously 'consultation light', it provides an excellent framework for ongoing dialogue as these sessions are promising to afford. In reference to both I would only observe that the process of "de-colonization", although addressed mainly within the context of relations with First Nations, is a deeply rooted problem within the western philosophical tradition which has prized the scientific objectification of peoples, objects

and indeed cultures. Museums world-wide are struggling with this legacy and the need to re-orient themselves within a network of power and agency relationships toward new models based on service and partnerships. It is not an easy task.

1. Rebuilding Trust:

The Royal British Columbia Museum betrayed the trust of British Columbians on **July 15, 1987**, when it imposed an entrance fee. Visitation more than halved from a million visits a year and its visitation demographics changed away from locals in favour of tourists. Management culture dramatically shifted to support marketing and revenue administration. Over a hundred years of community service and philanthropic links to community were severed and have never been adequately repaired. Levels of citizen visitation have never been rebuilt.

Like so many policy issues today this one falls back on economics. **Any future relationship of the RBCM with British Columbians must start with removal of admission fees.** And re-democratization of the museum.

To guarantee that RBCM maintains its world class status and meets international museum standards it should adopt a fiscal formula now more common with other liberal democracies in our league: a mix of ongoing core government funding, a trust endowment, retail sales, sponsorships and donations, special event fees and admission charges to temporary feature exhibitions.

2. A Sense of Purpose

The June 29, 2021 *Report to British Columbians*, outlined various iterations of the role and mandate of the RBCM. Oddly, while the word public is mentioned once, there is little consideration as to who this public is. *What We Heard* only starts to address this fundamental issue.

I would suggest the core mandate of the Royal British Columbia can be simply stated as:

“The Royal British Columbia Museum holds in trust the heritage of the Province for British Columbians.”

This starts with an understanding that both the **“Royal”** designation and its legal status as a **Crown Corporation** means the museum is not owned by government, but by the people. In this case people of the **British Columbia**. It implies that the objects (tangible heritage), and information relating to them (intangible heritage), are in fact not owned but held in trust on behalf of all British Columbians along with a set of obligations to them. Those obligations are in fact articulated by the internationally recognized definition of a museum.

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public,

accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” (as adopted at the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM, Prague, on 24 August 2022)

This core fiduciary relationship between the museum and British Columbians implies a whole set of obligations and responsibilities cogently articulated by the dialogue participants represented in *What We Heard*.

Ironically, the museums of the Smithsonian Institution at the heart of 21st century global capitalism in Washington D.C. have retained free entry. The major British museums returned to free entry after a brief experiment. Some of the major museums in Canada have started to remove admission charges in whole or in part, Glenbow, Calgary, being the most recent.

The global COVID experience has put to rest the idea of unfettered hyper-capitalist profit seeking.

The fundamental business case for RBCM should be re-examined with a view to removing the charge for ordinary admission, or the services of its curatorial staff. And that includes reproduction fees for archival documents and images.

3. Institutional Culture:

A glance through media headlines today illustrates the fact that Canada's leading museological institutions are in serious trouble. The roots of these problems lie in the 1970s & 80s as cultural institutions in Canada fell under the sway of economic neo-liberalism of the Regan/Thatcher years. Corporatisation, business planning, monetizing assets superseded the traditional public service model. The profile of the museum professional changed radically as a host of new specialists and trades assumed work-place dominance. The core of the museum profession – the curators - lost status, majority, and in the case of the RBCM even their job definitions, as indicated by the name change to “Collections Managers”. Museum Directors, whose skill sets were traditionally based within a museum-related discipline, were replaced by “CEO’s” often professional managers with no museum experience or discipline grounding. At the RBCM this change in the skills complexion of the administrative ranks was compounded by the drift downward in the number of employees from a high of 200+ to 144 or so today.

As these changes encountered vigorous debate within the museum, archives and library professions a 1971 paper by Glenbow Museum director Duncan Cameron, *The Museum: Temple or Forum* (1971) provided a common reference point. Ironically, when the dust settled, **libraries chose the *agora*, museums the *circus***. Visit the new mult-award winning Calgary Public Library to see Canada's finest example of the librarian's option.

Unfortunately, this naïve decision, made in anticipation of freeing cultural agencies from the yolk of governments, the vagaries of public finances (and democracy) found museums captured

by corporate (often elitist) boards and celebrity CEOs. Excessive architectural monument building brought some institutions to the brink of bankruptcy.

As the RBCM seeks to reorient itself to the service of its many publics, collections and those who care for them should be placed at the forefront, and the institutional culture should be focused on supporting that relationship.

4. Sharing the Wealth

Driving (or constraining) policy, documents which underpin the purpose and operations of the RBCM today are various mentioned in the two reports referenced above: UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) the Human Rights Code, DRIPA (The B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People), *The Findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, IMA (the Information Management Act), the Museum Act (2003) and others.

Oddly, the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals), adopted by all United Nations Member States as an urgent call to action in 2015, is not mentioned. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve “*ending poverty and other deprivations ... hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth - all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.*”

The SDG’s now lie at the heart of our world’s social, economic, cultural and political agenda. Government, corporations and agencies of civil society have all adopted ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) measures as core performance indicators.

The SDGs should be officially and publicly positioned, then brought to core of all RBCM operational policies.

5. The Hub Concept

The *What We Found Report* contains numerous references to the concept of an RBCM renaissance as a HUB, of shared ideas, communities, interests, and citizenry for the Province. It is a profound and useful idea.

We now recognize the globe is a complex eco-system. The collections of the RBCM could be “de-disciplined” in the sense of being organized, managed and presented around integrated cross-disciplinary themes rather than the water-tight traditional subject areas. A conceptual hub, the inter-dependence of people and environment, the impact of the past on the present and future, the interaction of artefacts, beliefs, and ideas could drive exhibition narratives. The *Te Papa* New Zealand National Museum in Wellington pioneered this idea 30 years ago. (Free entrance.) *Te*

Papa is also a pioneer in integrating the culture, stories and histories of the Maori peoples into the broader story of *Aotearoa*.

Over a million Canadians a year will be in desperate need of familiarization with Canadian culture and values, and particularly the multi-cultural narrative that has built and continues to maintain British Columbia society. This includes a cohort of school children entering middle school and close to half-a-million immigrants, foreign students, refugees and continuing temporary workers. The RBCM should be positioning itself as a central HUB and resource for a cluster of services: all levels of formal education, immigrant and refugee-assistance agencies, churches and cultural institutions throughout the Province to address the needs of this audience.

Victoria is part of this demographic growth phenomenon adding about 10,000 people over the past three years. The RBCM should join with Greater Victoria Public Library to act as welcoming community HUBs where newcomers and youth can meet and greet along with the resident population, attending events, celebrations, learning and research activities.

In the local context, the RBCM needs to address relations with its nearby poor cousin, the Maritime Museum of British Columbia. Evicted from its Bastion Square home of many decades by the Province, the museum continues to punch above its weight in the quality and reach of its services to the community from its small temporary facility. Historical themes and interests overlap. In addition to the MMBC another museological institution that may be added to the local cultural landscape, a Coast Salish Cultural Centre recently mooted by the Songhees Nation.

The new RBCM will find itself emerging into a new geo-political reality. This is Canada's announced economic and political shift to embracing the countries on the Pacific. This is outlined in the recently published *Canada's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific*. The museum could position itself as a cultural diplomacy HUB. First as a bridge between our Asian population (10% and growing) and their countries and cultures of origin. Second, as a host and source for international exchanges including exhibitions, experts and arts events.

The notion of community HUB should therefore drive the architectural program for the new or renovated museum buildings. Overall design should respectfully acknowledge the institutional urbanism of its location on Victoria's entrance harbour. The functional design program could emulate Wellington's *Te Papa* museum entrance halls to include a land acknowledgement and ceremonial Coast Salish greeting space. Like the London Natural History Museum exhibit floors could host communal nodes such as refreshment bars, food venues, kids play areas and learning/discussion circle pits.

The Hub concept provides a conceptual architecture on which to build the RBCM's new management culture and its services to communities.

6. Humility

This final observation deals with the posture of the Royal BC Museum in continuing this dialogue and ultimately reinventing itself for the challenges of the 21st Century.

While major Canadian museums and galleries are reeling under new stresses ranging from the climate crisis, economic and industrial transition, indigenous justice, to international global inter-state conflict- a large component of museum sector has essentially, and quietly, got it right. That is local community museums. Funded for the most part at the local level, supported by local government, directly serving local - often very diverse - populations, they feature free (or very low) entrance fees, dynamic community-based services, inspired and engaging programmes, dedicated volunteer boards, and highly respected (often multi-skilled) staff.

In this case, rather than a HUB the RBCM should see itself as part of the **virtuous circle** of British Columbia's community museums. Seriously listening to this community was glaringly omitted in the first round of consultations. The range of opportunities and ideas is enormous. Should there be, like Tate Britain, or Victoria & Albert Dundee, a RBCM North in say, Prince George, or an RBCM East in, say, Nelson, or an RBCM exhibition centre in Vancouver? Why not? And if so, or not, what kind of future collaboration with the local museum communities around the Province is envisaged. They are the true experts when it comes to dealing with the diversity of British Columbia's cultural and natural landscape, and interests of our wide and growing community of visitors to museums, historic sites, art galleries, archives, nature centres and parks.

The RBCM needs to open, and permanently structure, a deep, focused and ongoing dialogue with the wider community museum profession in British Columbia.

Conclusion:

These observations are presented in good faith to further discussion and debate in the forthcoming dialogue sessions, and the decision making that follows.